

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



VS

Interviewed by Barry Chad

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Interviewer's Note

Great stories of growing up on Pittsburgh's North Side in the Croatian community centered there. War stories of the Allied landings in Normandy. Working at the stockyards on Herr's Island. The great St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936: everything and anything going down the river: chicken coops with a rooster crowing away, all kinds of big oil tanks, hundreds and hundreds of cans of lard floating down the river, all kinds of trees and logs, you name it, everything was floating down the river.

Interview

bc: Your friend said that you were in D-Day plus five.

VS: Yes.

bc: You were in the Army.

VS: I went in as a replacement in the Artillery.

In the first three or four days there were quite a few wounded and killed. And I was part of the first replacements.

bc: Were you drafted?

VS: Yes. In 1942. I graduated from high school in '41. I was living with my father and he died in November of '42. I actually went into the Army in February '43. I went down to Camp Meade, Maryland, and from there to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I had my basic training there. Went down to Alabama for a while. Then to Boston. And went overseas in October '43.

bc: Where did you go to high school?

VS: Allegheny Vocational High School. It's all part of Community College [of Allegheny County] now.

bc: What did you study there?

VS: Electrical wiring, electrical appliances, little bit of machinist's trade. Of course it was one week academic and the next week would be trade. That's the way they operated then. They had a lot of sports: playing baseball and mush ball and track. I participated in all that. I was pretty agile when I was 16...17...18....

bc: Once you graduated, did you go right to work?

VS: Yes. I worked part-time on Liberty Avenue, Downtown, fixing sweepers. It was called Bell Vacuum at that time, making, I think, 40-cents-an-hour then. This was in '41 and '42.

bc: Have you always lived in Pittsburgh?

VS: Yes.

bc: Where did you grow up?

VS: About three-quarters-of-a-mile from where I live now. Out towards 31st Street Bridge and East Ohio Street. In that area. Past Heinz and going up that way. It was all a Croatian center back in the '20s and '30s during the Depression. We had a lot of hobos hopping off of freights and going to houses and asking for something to eat. My father would give them a couple of slices of bread with jelly. They appreciated that. You'd be surprised. Times were pretty tough back in the '30s. We had no ballfields or swimming pools like you have today. We had to swim down the river. I used to go on the ice and I'd fall through. One time just my head was above the ice. Luckily I had a buddy there about ten feet from where I was on the shore. He pushed out a long stick to me—otherwise I'd have gone under the ice. I wouldn't have been here today.

bc: That's what happened to George Washington. George Washington was crossing the Allegheny in winter and he had to be pulled out.

VS: He was up by where the 40th Street Bridge is now—"Washington's Crossing." But I was down where the 31st Street Bridge is—between Heinz and the 31st Street Bridge.

bc: Do you remember when there used to be houseboats on the Allegheny?

VS: Some had houseboats; some had shacks on the shoreline. They had rowboats and, if we had a nickel, we'd give it to them and go out for two or three hours rowing up and down the Allegheny River. Of course we couldn't go past Heinz because you had the dam there at that time. Where Heinz is today there was a dam there and you couldn't go any further.... I think there's still a pier there on The Strip District side. From the 16th Street Bridge about 400-500 feet upstream I think that's where the dam was. After World War II they did away with the dam. I think it prevented a lot of debris from floating down the river during the 1936 Flood. I lived on East Ohio Street and I could look at the Allegheny River and see everything floating downstream.

bc: So you're a Northsider.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

VS: None.

bc: You're an only-child.

VS: Yes.

bc: So am I.

VS: I had one of the best fathers that anybody could ever have. I got in all kinds of different trouble.... I tried to do good, but when you're twelve...13...14...you get in all kinds of mischief....

bc: What did he do for a living?

VS: My father worked different jobs. He used to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad for a number of years. He used to be on long runs sometimes. He'd go up to Chicago on the Pennsylvania Line and then he'd come back and go up to Altoona. He was more like a brakeman.

During the Depression, when he got laid off, he worked on Herr's Island [today Washington's Landing]. I worked there—in the stockyards—after the War. He

worked there back in the '20s and '30s. At that time you weren't making much money—like 50 cents-an-hour—but at least it was work during the Depression. He had a good job there. He ran a press. He used to press tin cans. Steel mills would buy that for scrap iron. [However] after so many years [the steel mills] quit buying [these pressed cans]. (The name of the concern was Walker's. They [ran] the City Dump at that time. Horse-and-wagon days. And they used to pick up all the rubbish and garbage. And my father used to press all those cans. [Well,] the steel mills didn't like it on account of Walker's didn't want to clean the cans. They were all dirty. Sometimes even rats would get inside...and they pressed everything. So that ended that.) But he had a good job operating that press. That was before the city had the garbage trucks. It was the horse-and-wagon days. My uncle even drove a garbage wagon for about 35 years. And that was heavy work in those days. In those days, the garbage cans used to taper up...the can itself was sixteenth-of-an-inch thick metal...the can itself probably weighed about 30 pounds and full of garbage...and constantly working with that day-in day-out.... My uncle did that for about 35 years.

bc: This was a private garbage hauling company?

VS: Yes.

bc: Did Walker sort through the garbage when they got it back to the dump?

VS: I used to go over there—I wasn't allowed there—but sometimes I'd keep my father company when he pressed those cans.... The way they operated: the garbage wagon would come in loaded with garbage. And they got paid in those days not by the hour but by the weight. When the garbage wagon came in, it went on a scale and they weighed it. They dumped the wagons there. And they also had rubbish wagons, loaded with cardboard and other stuff. At Walker's they had guys to separate that stuff.

bc: Nasty work.

VS: Some of those guys couldn't read or write English whereas my father could. He had eight years of schooling in Croatia. He picked up the English language really well and he could read and write in English too. I helped him when I was going to school too. So he got the job at the press—you had to read gauges and all that.... A lot of the guys there couldn't read or write so they couldn't qualify for that kind of work.

bc: You worked at the stockyards after you got out of the Service. There were still stockyards there in the late '40s.

VS: I worked there for seven-and-a-half years.

bc: What did you do?

VS: A little bit of everything. First of all, when you start there, you're an extra. And then they'd call you up—say, a train would come in from South Bend, Indiana, or from Chicago.... They'd call you up on the phone, around six in the evening, and say that such-and-such a train was coming in at eleven o'clock at night. They'd want to know if you'd work that night. I'd say, Yeah. I'd work from eleven to seven, unloading cars.... During the daytime you'd have the job of going on the haywagon and pitching hay into the racks for the cattle. The hogs we used to feed corn. It was hard work, but it was interesting too.

bc: Did you ever drive the cattle up Pig Hill [Rialto Street also known as Ravine Street]?

VS: When I was a kid, back in the '30s, they used to drive cattle from Herr's Island, where the stockyards were—it was called Pittsburgh Joint Stockyards—they used to drive sheep and calves and hogs along East Ohio Street up to Troy Hill Road and then they had a packing house out on Spring Garden Avenue—Oswald & Hess. They didn't take them by trucks then. Another way was up Ravine Street right across from the 31st Street Bridge and which we called Pig Hill when I was a kid. It was cobblestone. It was steep. They used to drive the hogs up there—across Troy Hill and down into Spring Garden. I used to be up on Troy Hill a lot when I was a kid—Gardener Field—we used to play baseball, softball. Like I said, on East Ohio Street we didn't have any field or anything....

bc: Before you went to Allegheny Vocational, where did you go to elementary school?

VS: First I went to Saint Nicholas grade school—where Saint Nicholas church is today. On the east side of the church was a school that was called “Duquesne Elementary School.” I went there for a couple of years. Then Saint Nicholas bought it over and made it a Catholic school. I went there for a year. (In those days the nuns were really tough on you—for every little thing that went wrong—the whole class—you had to put your hands on the desk like this—and the nun would go around with a round stick and hit your hands and make your knuckles bleed. A lot of kids would go home and start complaining—then they got beat by their own mother and father too! My father never hit me. I told him what went on in class and that was it.) From there I went to Schiller School—I think it was in the third grade—across from Sarah Heinz House, across from [what is now] the Penn Brewery. I went there until the sixth grade. Then from there I went to Latimer Junior High, which is still there. It's an apartment now. In eighth grade I decided to go to Allegheny Vocational and stayed there until the twelfth grade when I graduated.

bc: How close, how “tight” was the Croatian community that you were a part of?

VS: Very very tight. Like I said, I was born and raised there and at that time it was just about all Croatians. We did have one Hungarian family moved in prior to World War II. I think one Polish family moved in after that too. It was a close-knit community. And people worked either—like my father did—on the island (Herr's Island) or McGraw Wool [later to become Pittsburgh Wool Co.]. You don't remember McGraw Wool.

bc: Is that the one that Heinz took over?

VS: There were two: [McGraw] was where they tanned the hides (where Heinz took over by eminent domain). Further up, east, was—where a lot of girls and women worked—they used to spin wool. They had a lot of machines spinning wool. A lot of women from East Ohio Street worked there. And then Lutz & Schramm was a plant that made pickles and jellies. I also worked there for three years before I went to the ' yards. There was a lot of work in those days—all kinds of factories: National Lead and Oil Company; Standard Ice Company.

We didn't have to go to The Strip District to get ice, we got ice right there [off of East Ohio Street]. Back in the '30s, you didn't have a refrigerator; you had an ice box. I used to go there many a time [with] a burlap sack and a bucket or whatever and we were allowed to go in there in back of the ice house. In the summertime it could be 90 outside. Inside it was like zero. The guys working there were all bundled up with gloves. We used to go in there and get little chips of ice and take it home and put it in the ice box. In those days you had the iceman also: you could buy a block of ice—so big—for a quarter. Half-a-dollar so big. But then most ice boxes—after 50 cents worth of ice—you couldn't put any more in. The ice boxes were thick, well-insulated. You had a pan underneath—if you didn't watch that pan, eventually it was going to fill up and go all over the floor.

bc: So tell me about the '36 flood. Your friend seems to feel that you have some good stories about the flood.

VS: I lived there. I could just look across East Ohio Street, across the railroad tracks and right where National Lead used to be. (They burned down right before the flood.) There was this wide open space. I could see everything and anything going down the river: chicken coops with a rooster crowing away, all kinds of big oil tanks.... Pittsburgh Provisions (which was called Armour later on) they were all flooded out on the island and hundreds and hundreds of cans of lard were floating down the river. All kinds of trees and logs, you name it, everything was floating down the river. I was surprised it didn't knock any of the bridges out. The water level was even with the decks of the Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Street bridges. The flood waters were 46 feet high. Where I lived—East Ohio Street and the railroad tracks—that was the low area. If it had risen another two feet, it would have come in to where I lived. I can remember, [where Troy Hill Road meets East Ohio Street the water was two to three feet deep there.]

bc: When you were drafted, did you go in with your buddies or did you just go in by yourself?

VS: When I was drafted, there was one other guy from East Ohio Street, Johnny Holmsa. He was drafted the same day as I was and we went on train in February of '43. We went to Camp Meade, Maryland. After a couple of days there we got our uniforms. Then we separated: he went down to Camp Blanding, Florida, and I ended up in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. I stayed there for about 13 weeks.

bc: Did you see action before D-Day?

VS: No, I was in England for eight months.

bc: What were you doing in England?

VS: Oh that's another long story. We didn't do much in England. We'd done all our training in the States. In England the fog used to roll in just about every day. You couldn't see sometimes, ten to 15 feet ahead of you in broad daylight. It was just fog all the time. A lot of times they'd give us a bat and a ball and say, Go out and play ball on the field. How could you play ball when you could hardly see the pitcher?! We didn't do much in England: go to town; drink what they called "3.2 beer".... For eight months we didn't do anything hardly.

bc: After the eight months, what happened then?

VS: I was there from October of '43 until June 6, 1944 when the invasion was. In the meantime we spent a few months in Cardiff, Wales. Then we [were given] some special "impregnated clothing" [that was supposed to resist water]. I got off the LCI boat, it was a British LCI—Landing Craft Infantry; (LST is Landing Ship Tanks)—you can imagine: I'm six feet tall stepping off into this deep water—the shorter guys almost drowned. They opened the front of the boat and we were told, "Okay, boys!" And we jumped off the boat's ramp right into the water and we had to walk about 100 yards or so up to the beach. A lot of those ships were made at Dravo [Corporation] on Neville Island. You had to be careful: they said there were still some mines around. [There were some obstacles in the water] but where I walked, it was mostly soft sand. Then we get on the beach and the first thing I see is an Army nurse kneeling down taking care of a wounded GI. I was surprised because she was there before we even landed. She was there before D plus five. I went into Utah beach. There were two battleships shelling the Germans—maybe about 15 to 20 miles inland. After we got up on the beach, there must have been 100 to 150 of us. A brigadier general gave us a little speech in a patch of woods and told us that we were going in with the 90th Division—a division has about 12,000 men—and that's how I got into combat. We could hear a lot of shells going off from our side and from the Germans, but we were fortunate. None really landed close to where I was. Those two battleships—they were about a mile up the beach—and, boy, when they let go of those 16 inch shells, I mean, everything just rocked all over the place.

bc: Where did your outfit go after you all landed in Normandy?

VS: We fought in Normandy through June, July, and August. I think we broke through Normandy in the early part of August and through France and into Luxembourg and the Battle of the Bulge and from there into Germany. I ended up in Czechoslovakia for three weeks when the War ended. (That's how far we chased the Germans. They didn't want to give up, that's all.)

bc: When the War ended, you were in Czechoslovakia with the Army.

VS: Right. [The War] ended up May 8th. But, we got word May 6th, May 7th that the War was over: you know how rumors go. Finally, on May 8th they said it's official—the War is over. We were in Czechoslovakia. Then we went back into Germany, stayed for a while in Nuremberg, Germany, where all the trials were of Nazi criminals. And then, from Nuremberg, we went into what used to be a concentration camp, Flossenbug, Germany. We stayed there for Occupational Duty until I was discharged in October '45. It wasn't as notorious as Buchenwald or Auschwitz—some of those other prisons in Poland and Germany—but there were quite a few that the Germans executed in Flossenbug [including Dietrich Bonhoeffer]. They had a crude crematory—as if you were putting a sheep or hog in to roast with a couple of ladles. They built a fire underneath with wood and whatever else [was available] and that's how they cremated people. To the right of the crematory, there was a big hole in the ground.... Our Captain took us over and said, Here's where all the bones and parts of the cremated people were.... Bones and ashes in the ground.... It's a sight I'll never forget. In a courtyard they had a big pile of shoes—not the tops of the shoes, but just the soles...little baby's shoes, men's, women's.... Just a big pile of them....

bc: When you got back to the States....

VS: My godfather was a dental technician and he had an office right across from the Stanley Theater—it's the Benedum [Center for the Performing Arts] today. It was 711 Penn Avenue up on the eighth floor, top floor. He had a laboratory there. He and another dental technician were together and I worked for him for about nine months making false teeth, but he didn't want to pay me more than 50 cents-an-hour. In 1945 when I was 22-years-old, I wanted to make more money. So then I quit on him. (He didn't like that.) It was tedious work—making false teeth. That wasn't for me. [My godfather] wanted me to make a livelihood out of it: I couldn't see it.

From [being assistant to the dental technician] I went to work at Woods Run—Buhl Optical—not too far from [where] Community College [is now]—Allegheny and Western Avenues. Buhl Optical—they made lenses for cameras. I worked in [their] machine shop because I'd had a little experience working in a machine shop when I was in Vocational. I worked there about two-and-a-half years. I was going to stay there but it was another case of 50 cents-an-hour. We had about ten or 15 guys working there and the rest were women. They went on strike and they settled for a lousy nickel after being out for a week or so. I quit there. It was interesting work but there was no money there. What I should have done at that time was go to Westinghouse or a place where I could have made more money. But I had the experience anyway....

From Buhl Optical I ended up at Lutz & Schramm. That was interesting work too. I worked there for about three years, doing a little bit of everything. Working on the assembly line, the girls would put jelly in jars. We used to have a four-wheeler and push boxes of glass up to the conveyors.... It was an old building with no air-conditioning. And, when you worked up there in the summertime, I mean, it was sweltering hot in there. We used to get frozen strawberries in 50-gallon barrels. We used to cook the strawberries. During the Fall—September [and] October—we used to get a lot of apples in. We made apple butter. And then from there I went to the 'yards—seven-and-a-half years. At that time I was making, like, a buck eighty-five [or] two dollars an hour. And then, when I went to the 'yards, I was getting another ten or fifteen cents more an hour. I stayed there for seven years and finally it went under. They quit shipping livestock from Kansas City and Chicago. It was all coming in by refrigerated truck. [When I worked there,] every evening you'd always have a long line of [railroad] cars with sheep, hogs, and cattle coming in—sometimes a hundred cars....

I got laid off at the stockyards. They laid you off by seniority. I only had seven-and-a-half years. Some guys worked there 40 years. And they had a good pension too. I didn't have any work there for a while. I was selling pretzels in town—where the Warner Theater is. I sold pretzels there for eight years. Pretzels were ten cents or three for a quarter. Also sold pretzel sticks. They were a nickel. A Polish guy—lived up on Polish Hill—he'd bake em in the morning and, by the time they'd be all ready, I'd meet him in town by Warner's at 11:30 or twelve o'clock and I'd start selling there. I might sell 30 [to] 40 dollars worth of pretzels in three hours and he'd give me what he felt like: sometimes three dollars, four

dollars, whatever.... There was no compensation or anything. I was living with my wife on Monterey [Mexican War Streets]. We lived there for 21 years.

I also worked at Penn Window Downtown. We washed walls, windows, everything. The window cleaners were in a union; the wall washers didn't have a union. We always made ten cents an hour less than they did.

bc: When you say "wall washers"...

VS: We used to do lights, ceilings, walls....

bc: You washed walls inside...

VS: Not all the time. In the summertime we'd clean the U. S. Steel buildings out in [their] Monroeville Research Center—stainless steel buildings...they were beautiful buildings too...all stainless steel.... And we'd clean that with acid and that was dangerous work.... We used to do a lot of work for U. S. Steel—in Braddock [and] Duquesne [and] McKeesport.

bc: You've done a lot of all kinds of jobs. When did you quit, retire, stop working?

VS: Penn Window, when I worked for them, they started going under. And then I got a job at General Cleaning. [I worked part-time there and I retired from there.]

bc: Since you've been retired, how have you kept busy?

VS: I spend time a couple days a week with my friend [who set up this interview]. [I used to travel.] The wife and I, we'd travel to Atlantic City, Wildwood, down to the St. Petersburg / Tampa area, Virginia Beach. When I was working for the stockyards I could get a free pass on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

bc: This is a big question, but you're probably in a good position to answer it. The North Side sure has changed since you were a kid. How has Pittsburgh changed since you were a kid?

VS: The North Side has changed drastically in all these years. [Once] you had the Market House, Boggs and Buhl department store. You had everything. I had a lot of friends—a lot of them died or moved away. Today it's all dead around there—like the Mall [Allegheny Center Mall]. When the Mall first opened up, it was alright—you had all those businesses. Now you can walk through there and you don't see anybody. Federal Street is the same way. They tore everything down. It ain't like it used to be.

bc: How about the city Downtown?

VS: Right after World War II—before everybody had televisions—you had all those theaters. At one time you had about eight or ten theaters Downtown: Loew's Penn (which is Heinz Hall [for the Performing Arts]); the Stanley Theater (which is the Benedum Center); you had the Ritz Theater on Liberty Avenue; you had the Center Theater; the Barry which was on Penn Avenue right by Seventh Street. You had a number of theaters. Of course the North Side had a lot too: the Garden; the Kenyon; the Sky (towards where the Stadium is today); the Novelty; the J. P. Harris (where they had a lot of stage shows—back in '46 and '47—including comedians, and they had a Bingo too).

bc: You've had a lot to say.

VS: Like I said, I'm telling you just like I remember it.

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